

Context

Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990) explores urban subjects who freely move throughout New York, respectively, but whose movements are nonetheless dictated by class, purposefulness, gender, sexuality, and/or color.

Assignment

The second major homework assignment asks you utilize scenic analysis (a form of close reading) to create a conversation with bell hook's essay "Is Paris Burning?" (1996). To do so, dissect **well-chosen, concise quotations** from hooks to **articulate how your claim differs**. You may agree or disagree with hooks' argument; simply, you must add to the critical conversation by expanding on her claim or creating a counterargument. I have added a summary with key quotations below. While you may refer directly to text, feel free to respond directly to the quotes provided.

Next, find 2-4 scenes from *Paris is Burning*. As a form of pre-writing, I encourage you to do a shot-by-shot analysis from each: the process will help you find evidence for your body paragraphs. When constructing your body paragraphs, detail the major elements from the shot-by-shot analysis (ranging from costumes, choreography, editing choices, voiceovers, etc.) that help support your claim.

Just like the final essay, position body paragraphs around a concise **minor claim** rather than segregating discussion of source materials to a specific paragraph. Therefore, each body paragraph should pivot between close reading moments of hooks and filmic analysis of Livingston's film. Individual body paragraphs (and by extension topic sentences) may place greater emphasis on hooks or Livingston at key moments, but aim to create a conversations between the sources.

In essence, in 2-3 pages articulate your reading of the film: Do you agree with hooks close reading of "Is Paris Burning?" What would you argue instead? How does scenic analysis of Livingston's film support your point of view?

Considerations:

- Is Livingston self-aware in privileging of white femininity as the aesthetic ideal?
- Does "the representation of whiteness" remove the subversive quality of drag as a critique of heteronormative beauty?
- Is it important that "as white woman/lesbian filmmaker" Livingston be absent from the film?
- hooks argues that Livingston does not "oppose" her interview subject's idealization of white bourgeois womanhood. Is this true? Why is such opposition not congruent with Livingston's underlying claim in *Paris is Burning*?
- Does one's gender, sexuality or race inhibit them from creating work about members of another demographic? Is hooks correct in recognizing Livingston's privilege?

Format:

2-3 pages, typed, double-spaced, 12 pt. Times New Roman font. 1-inch margins. Provide proper MLA internal citation.

Student close-reading examples:

In *Paris is Burning*, director Jennie Livingston documents the black drag community in New York City and films balls where participants prepare for months to model across the stage. Typically, performers in the balls dress elegantly or mimic white culture – the major culture consisting of heteronormative white Americans. bell hooks criticizes Livingston for displaying white culture as the “quintessential site of unrestricted joy, freedom, power, and pleasure” (149). Hook claims that Livingston purposefully represents drag culture as worshipping white culture. Hook’s claim rings true since does not challenge white culture enough as Livingston too often focuses on her subjects’ aspirations to be socially accepted like white culture.

In a montage, Livingston films a white crowd walking during the day and, in doing so, she positions this group as the unchallenged norm. Livingston interlays several rapid medium shots of only white people walking outside in public on a sunny day and concludes with a happy heterosexual African American couple outside surrounded by a white crowd. She then cuts immediately to a gloomy shot inside of a ball with close ups focusing on drag culture participants. Livingston uses lighting to show how both sides live. She shows white culture being outside under the sun – showing how they are socially accepted and roam freely. Contrasting this bright white culture is the drag culture as they are filmed in an unlit space indoors. She does so to present a feeling of claustrophobia: drag culture must hide away since they are not socially accepted like white culture and heterosexuals. However, in using shots that illustrate how populous and wide spread white culture is, Livingston shows how white culture is the standard of social acceptance.

The 90s were a tough decade for minorities, particularly the forgotten community of Hispanic and African-American’s gay and drag culture. The creation of Jennie Livingston’s meaningful documentary, *Paris is burning* sheds lights onto the existence of this unfavorable community while showcases greater understandings of their issues of: sexual identity, homosexuality and racism to an outside audience, perhaps the dominant white world. When first release, this astonishing famous documentary stirred up the public with mixed perspectives on this sensitive subject. Without considering the exceptions, American author bell hooks criticizes Livingston for completely disregarding the actors’ connections to “a world of family and community beyond the drag ball,” in *Paris is Burning* to solely directs her idea towards sexual diversity and cultural exclusion (hooks 154). Meanwhile, Livingston confirms her awareness of the career challenges of participants by visually films panoramically their surroundings highlighting their lives outside of the drag community.

While Livingston uses very typical interviewing style of medium shots, she effectively includes the element of actors’ surroundings to shift the viewers’ focus to a minor portion of their lives. While interviewing Venus Xtravaganza about her rough day-to-day work life, Livingston directs the camera angle from a medium shot to long shot to purposely includes the street behind her informing Livingston’s awareness of the type of environment Xtravaganza works in. While still in the medium shot of Xtravaganza talking, Livingston cutaway to a long shot of the dancers on the street keeping her voice-over then instantly cross-cutting back to a medium shot of blurry Xtravaganza sitting and talking while the camera focuses on the pile of trash behind her. By using these filmic techniques, Livingston is able to visually displays Xtravaganza’s unstable, complicated and dangerous work environment and life in a broader spectrum.

Assignment

The final essay requires you to utilize **scenic analysis and rhetorical analysis**. As we explored in *Vertigo*, scenic analysis dissects a director's visual decisions by looking at individual shots or a brief series of shots. Rhetorical analysis explores an author's strategies and motivations by examining the individual words an author uses and the purposeful placement of those words.

On a college level, the purpose of **analysis** is to 1) understand how the scene functions so, most importantly, 2) add a **deeper level commentary** that is not obvious in a rudimentary reading or viewing of the primary texts. Therefore, you will present your **individual, subjective interpretation** of the work by using close reading evidence from the text to **support the legitimacy of your reading**.

For your final essay your **primary texts** will be: Nikolai Leskov's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1865) and William Oldroyd (director) and Alice Birch's (screenwriter) *Lady Macbeth* (2016).

In essence, in 5-7 pages articulate your reading of the film: In adapting *Lady Macbeth*, what **commentary** do Oldroyd and Birch provide regarding Katherine's revolt against patriarchal society? To put it simply, through Oldroyd (visual) and Birch (rhetorical) decisions and changes what do the authors wish to say and are they successful in doing so? Consider: what drives Katherine? Is she sympathetic? What power dynamics does the film criticize? How does the film reject typical representations of the male and female genders?

In doing so, I would like you to build off of the following sources:

- 1) Primary Sources
 - a. Nikolai Leskov's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1865)
 - i. At minimum, you rhetorically analyze sections from at least two different chapters.
 - b. William Oldroyd (director) and Alice Birch's (screenwriter) *Lady Macbeth*
 - i. At minimum, you perform a filmic analysis from at least two different scenes.
- 2) Secondary Sources
 - a. Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze as discussed in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975)
 - b. Viktor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization as discussed in "Art as Technique" (1917)
 - c. André Bazin's "Adaptation or the Cinema as Digest" (1948)

Format

5-7 pages typed, double-spaced, 12 pt. Times New Roman font. 1-inch margins. Microsoft word files only. Provide proper MLA internal citation.

